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Handling Grief and Loss:

Guidance for Employees and Managers

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Stages of Grief

Denial

The first reaction to a death is often to refuse that the person is gone. By failing to recognize the reality of a death, a person can postpone experiencing pain. Denial is usually accompanied by an emotional numbness and a tendency to busy oneself with other matters as a distraction.

Anger

Once it becomes apparent that the denial is ineffective, an individual may become angry. The anger may be directed at the deceased person for leaving and for causing such turmoil in survivors. Anger may also be directed at physicians or family members that are perceived as having been responsible for the deceased.

Bargaining

At this stage, the person tries to figure out ways to side-step grief and other painful emotions associated with the death. This may involve attempting to convince oneself that it is possible to negotiate reality and mentally alter the course of past events.

Depression

It is during this stage that the person experiences a sort of emotional collapse. The energy he or she has been expending to suppress painful feelings has left the person exhausted and an overwhelming sadness often emerges. This stage may be accompanied by social withdrawal and a decrease in physical activity.

Acceptance

At this stage, the person finally comes to terms with the reality of the death. One is at last resigned to dealing with the loss. This may occur along with a realization of the inevitability of death for every human being.

Grief at Work

Introduction

Grief is the normal and natural response to loss, a universal human experience. Nearly eight million people will be directly affected by a death this year; half of them will be in the workplace during the grieving period. Millions more will grieve other important losses—relationships, homes, jobs.

Although we try to establish health boundaries between our work and personal lives, we know the importance of jobs and coworkers. For many, work provides a sense of community. For some, it feels like family. Employees often derive their sense of well-being from their work.

Every workplace must deal with complex emotional issues. The more difficult emotions, like grief, can disturb workers and diminish the work environment. Colleagues want to do the right thing, but are not sure how to do it. Meanwhile, managers and employees may feel pressured and anxious, knowing the work must still get done. It's no wonder that we need help in working through grief.

What Is It Like to Grieve?

Grief is experienced on many levels. We know that grief can be responsible for physical symptoms such as trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, fatigue or actual illness. Grief affects the way we see the world and ourselves. During times of loss, it's the filter through which we receive information and make decisions.

The most obvious effects of grief are our own feelings. Almost all emotions can be part of a grief reaction, and they may be experienced with dizzying speed and intensity. Fear, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation, and a seemingly bottomless sorrow may all be part of our grief. There is no order or scale by which to measure these emotions. There is no time limit on grief.

If faith is a part of our lives, it can be a source of comfort as we grieve. But we may also question how this loss fits with our understanding of God. It may feel like God has forgotten us or is not there at all. When we need it most, we may struggle with what we've believed for a long time.

While we wade through these thoughts and feelings, we must also cope with the world outside. We may feel angry that the world won't slow down for a moment, that it doesn't even seem to take notice of this awesome event in our lives. It might bother us when we see others enjoying life.

It hurts when others don't mention the loss and sometimes it hurts when they do. We need some time alone to get our bearings. We may wish to regain our identity by resuming our routine, or even plunge into activities that keep us too busy to feel.

It's easy to see why grieving people wonder if they're normal. Our understanding of grief is limited, and each human being is very different. There's no right way to grieve, and no short cut around it. Grieving is not a weakness, it's a necessity. It is how we heal from our loss and move on.

Grief may never go away, but it will change. And we change, too. We are never the same again. We can find new ways of feeling, working, and believing. The loss and its meaning become part of life, and this new life can be healthy and happy.

I Don't Know What to Expect

If you've been carrying your grief to work each day, or if you are returning to the job after a loss, you may be wondering how you're going to get through this time. When a death is expected or has already happened, you might even wonder how you're going to get through the rest of your life.

You now have two jobs. You have responsibilities to your employer, and your job is important to you. But the work of grief is just as important. It can't be put aside or ignored—the only way past grief is to move through it. Grief is hard work and often lonely work, but you can find comfort and guidance along the way.

Taking Care of Yourself

- ♦ Don't expect too much of yourself. Do things because you can, not because you "should."
- ♦ Take control of seemingly small things: who to be with, when to write a letter, what to put off until later. When life seems out of control, we begin to reclaim it a little at a time.

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- ♦ Important items can wait. The grieving period is no time to make big decisions, like selling a home or switching jobs. Give yourself time before you make any changes that will alter the rest of your life.
- ♦ Time is your friend. Make sure that you take time to rest, to be with people who support you, and to be alone with your thoughts.
- ♦ Decide that you will survive intense emotions. Don't turn away from painful sadness or anger because you're afraid of "losing it". Locate a quiet place and let yourself go; you can "find it" again.
- ♦ Pay special attention to your needs during holiday seasons or important anniversaries. Just when you're beginning to feel better, your grief feelings may come flooding back. Honor your memories and acknowledge the loss with traditions that recall happy moments. Be sure to make time to remember.

Getting Back to Work (I don't know what to expect)

- ♦ Decide how private you need to be, and tell your supervisor. Many people feel supported by the caring questions of others, but it's okay to ask that only one person in the office coordinate these good intentions.
- ♦ Ask about your company's bereavement leave policy to avoid any surprises on your paycheck. If you need more time, ask if other leave is available.
- ♦ Talk with your supervisor about your hours. You may be more tired than you know, and a temporary schedule adjustment may help.
- ♦ Ask your supervisor about a private place to gather your thoughts. Expect feelings to emerge out of nowhere. Speak up when you need a few moments alone.
- ♦ Don't let your work overwhelm you. Your supervisor may be able to shift some of your workload for a short time.
- ♦ Ask your supervisor or your human resources manager where to go if you need more help in coping with your feelings. An important part of their

job is the well-being of employees. They can suggest other resources and respect confidentiality. Find out what your company can do for you.

Connecting With Others

- ◆ Now or later, you'll want to talk about your experience. Find at least one good listener. Telling your story is an important part of the healing work of grief. Listening is the best gift that anyone can give you.
- ◆ Expect that people won't always say the right thing (if there is a right thing). They may be as inexperienced at offering help as you are at grieving. Accept that they mean well.
- ◆ Your loss will remind others of their own losses. Some people may become tearful or want to share their stories with you. Listening may bring comfort, but if it's more than you can bear, say so.
- ◆ If spiritual values and traditions have been meaningful to you, speak with a clergy member or a friend who shares your beliefs. Make room for your faith to be part of the grieving process.

After good days and bad days, missed occasions, funny moments, and quiet recognition; you'll see an unreliable rhythm to your feelings. This is what's normal for you and no one else. Eventually, you'll realize that you are able to concentrate more on the world around you and less on your feelings of grief. Healing is happening. The emotions may come and go for a long time; but you'll know that your life, though changed, will go on.

Resources for Grief Support

Since there's no standard for grieving, it can be hard to tell if we're making progress. Whether you're coping with your own grief or someone else's, the advice and reassurance of experienced counselors may help.

How do you know if it's time to ask for help? There is no wrong time and there doesn't need to be an emergency. It may be valuable just to hear that what's happening is normal.

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Perhaps you're aware that fatigue or feelings of isolation seem to be deepening, or you notice physical changes. If the normal grief emotions discussed in this booklet seem extreme—if they feel consuming or unmanageable—talking with a counselor can help.

Certainly if feelings of profound sadness lead you to worry about your safety, or if you have this concern about someone else, you should ask for help without delay.

- ♦ The hospice in your area has counselors who are trained in grief work. Hospices care for patients and families who face life-limiting illness, and they continue to care for these families and friends after a death.

Hospices offer their services to the community, as well. They usually have individual or group counseling, and workshops on topics related to grief. They can also recommend other professionals and volunteer services in your area.

- ♦ Many businesses have arrangements with area healthcare and social service organizations for additional employee support. Employee Assistance Programs provide short-term help that is usually free and always confidential. Managers and human resource offices can tell employees how to contact their EAP.
- ♦ Community mental health agencies often have counseling available by appointment, or may have walk-in clinics. They also offer telephone advice lines.
- ♦ Many private therapists—counselors, social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists—understand the issues of grief. Ask about their experience in this field when you make the appointment. Health insurance sometimes covers their services.
- ♦ Clergy of all faiths may have additional training in pastoral counseling. If your religious beliefs are important to you, find out if this help is available.

Remember, asking for help has nothing to do with being sick or in trouble. Asking for help reflects your decision to work through grief.

Grief and Loss at Work: Ideas for Employees

How Can I Help?

- Offer specific help. Many people are too tired or numb to decide what help they need. Coworkers can make that meal, wash that car, help with childcare.
- Acknowledge their loss and their grief. Don't wait until the right thing to say comes to you. There is no right thing. The wrong thing is to say nothing.
- Personalize what you say. "I remember how much I loved my brother. I'm so sorry about Ed's death." Shared feelings communicate more than good advice.
- Avoid comparisons. "I know just how you feel, because my brother Jim died recently too." What you know is how you felt, but we never really know another's feelings. Everyone's relationships and reactions are unique.
- Expect to hear the story told, again and again. Telling the story is a part of healing. You need to speak up if the time isn't right. "Gerry, I'm sorry I can't talk with you right now. Let's continue this over coffee this afternoon."
- Speak up if you're uncomfortable. "Gina, what you're saying is important. I'd like to help you find a better listener for these memories, because listening is difficult for me right now." Set limits.
- A touch can communicate more than words to those who feel alone. If you're comfortable doing so, ask permission to hug the employee.
- Holidays and anniversaries are especially difficult for the grieving. Ask what you can do to provide extra support at these times.

When a Coworker is Seriously Ill

- Keep in contact. Regular phone calls to the home or hospital say "you're still part of the team."
- Make sure you know what you can share and what is confidential. Honor those wishes even if you disagree with them.
- Unless the nature of the illness is confidential, get more information from health departments or private associations. Make it available to coworkers who may have questions.
- Check sick leave and other policies that deal with the employee's practical concerns.
- Make plans to continue calls, notes and other gestures of support. These contacts can be reassuring to sick employees and their coworkers alike.

Supporting the Workplace

- Respect privacy. You may be hearing personal and privileged information that should not be repeated. Honor closed doors and quiet moments.
- Expect tears. Like the rest of grieving, they're a normal part of healing.
- Watch out for other employees. Vivid memories and feelings may surface. Some unspoken grief may become noticeable.
- Include the employee in social plans. It's easy to assume that a grieving person won't feel up to it, but a light-hearted outing may be a great help to someone who is feeling isolated.
- When tasks need to be re-distributed, thank staff members for their extra effort. They're sharing both the emotional burden and the additional work.
- Support the efforts of others to help the employee. This sad time can be an opportunity to increase staff awareness of mutual support, teamwork, and the values that are part of your work together.
- Expect the best from grieving employees; they need to know you have confidence in them. Accept less than the best for a while. They also need to know that you recognize the impact of their loss. You can do both.

When a Coworker Dies

The death of a coworker seems devastating. This loss is felt in many different ways, depending on relationships with the person who died. The suggestions already offered are important, but consider these additional steps.

- Call an informal meeting. Give permission to grieve and to talk about feelings. If a death was sudden, accidental or violent: schedule additional times to talk.
- Bring in help if you need it. Your community hospice or employee assistance program can send a trained grief counselor to meet and talk with staff or can suggest other resources.
- Make certain that affected employees know of funeral and memorial arrangements, and that they have time to attend.
- Honor the person who died in an appropriate way. Collect money for a charitable donation, create a memorial book or bulletin board, or share a tribute in employee newsletters.

Grief and Loss At Work: Ideas For Managers

How Can I Help?

As a manager, you have work responsibilities. You see that deadlines are met, that you stay within your budget, and that your employees have a safe and productive environment. As a good manager, you care that your workers feel supported and valued, and that they can contribute to your company's success. You know that this balance can be hard to find.

When a coworker or a person you supervise is grieving, when an employee is seriously ill, and certainly when an employee dies; the needs of the workplace and the needs of affected workers may conflict. The suggestions offered here will help, but seek additional help if you need it.

Understanding Your Role

- Remember that this grief is important and necessary. "Snapping out of it" will not return the employee to a comfortable and productive state.
- The hard work of grief is also lonely work, and you can't make it go away. What you can do is to help create an environment where this work can progress.
- Set an example. Your caring support and professionalism will set a standard that will last long after this experience.
- If the employee has not returned to work, stay in touch. Coworkers might agree on one person to represent them, but supervisors should make sure they stay in touch as well.
- Read all of this material. Make it available to others.
- Make sure that you take care of yourself too. You have a lot on your shoulders.

Talking to a Grieving Employee

Before the employee returns to work, ask how you can help. Questions you might ask are:

- *Would you like me—or someone else—to share any information with the others?*
- *What information and details do you want others to know?*

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- *Do you want to talk about your experience or would you prefer to concentrate on your work?*

Listen carefully. The answers to these questions may change each day as emotions swirl. Keep asking, keep listening. Remember you can always call Human Resources or the Alternatives program at 800-466-8282 for more ideas about talking to employees regarding grief and loss.